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In Upstate NY village of Hoosick Falls, a trail of cancer leads to tap water

The Associated Press

By MARY ESCH

January 26, 2016

HOOSICK FALLS, N.Y. (AP) — After his factory worker father died a painful death from kidney cancer at age 68 in 2013, Michael Hickey made it his mission to find out why so many people in his hometown along the Hoosic River were getting sick.

Two years later, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has warned residents of Hoosick Falls not to drink or cook with water from municipal wells, and a plastics plant has agreed to install a \$2 million carbon filtration system at the village water treatment plant.

Hickey's campaign began with suspicion about industrial pollution in the factory village near the Vermont border. His father had worked for 35 years at a plant that made high-performance plastics similar to Teflon, so Hickey searched online for "cancer" and "Teflon."

What he found: PFOA.

Perfluorooctanoic acid, a water and oil repellent, had been used since the 1940s in products including non-stick cookware, stain-resistant carpeting and microwave popcorn bags. Manufacturers agreed to phase it out by the end of 2015 shortly after DuPont reached a \$16.5 million settlement with the EPA over the company's failure to report possible health risks associated with PFOA.

A scientific panel that conducted health studies as part of a DuPont settlement of a West Virginia class-action lawsuit concluded there was a "probable link" between PFOA exposure and kidney cancer, testicular cancer, thyroid disease, high cholesterol, ulcerative colitis and pregnancy-induced hypertension.

In Hoosick Falls, nobody has ever scientifically documented that the village has an unusually high cancer rate, but Hickey and a local doctor had heard enough anecdotal evidence that they felt it should be addressed.

"There's always been talk around town about how there's a lot of cancer," Hickey said. "When my dad, who didn't drink or smoke, was diagnosed with kidney cancer, that made it more personal."

Dr. Marcus Martinez, the family doctor for many of the village's 3,500 residents, added there certainly seemed to be a high rate of cancer there, particularly rare, aggressive forms. The 44-year-old Martinez himself is in remission from aggressive prostate cancer.

When the two men suggested testing the village water supply, part-time Mayor David Borge at first refused, citing state guidelines. New York state classifies PFOA as an "unspecified organic contaminant" and doesn't require testing for it.

The EPA has a non-enforceable guidance level of 400 parts per trillion — roughly 4 teaspoons in enough water to fill a 10-mile string of rail tankers.

Hickey used his own money in summer 2014 to have water from his kitchen tap and other sources tested. The results showed PFOA at 540 ppt from Hickey's home, exceeding the EPA's guidance. Village officials subsequently tested the municipal supply and found PFOA at similar levels.

Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics, part of a Paris-based global conglomerate, in 1999 became the fifth owner of a plastics factory in Hoosick Falls. It conducted tests in the summer of 2015 and reported a PFOA level of 18,000 ppt in groundwater under its plant, 500 yards from the village's main water wells.

"Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics is committed to helping the village of Hoosick Falls with this situation," company spokesman Carmen Ferrigno said. While the source of the PFOA contamination hasn't been identified, Saint-Gobain has been paying for bottled water for residents since November and has agreed to pay for filtration to remove the chemical from the public water supply, he said.

Hickey and Martinez, along with Albany environmental lawyer David Engel, weren't satisfied. They wanted people to be told not to drink the tap water, as well as a full investigation and remediation.

Engel contacted Judith Enck, who heads the EPA region that includes New York. She issued a statement in December warning residents not to drink or cook with village water. Until then, state and village officials had told residents the water was unlikely to cause health problems.

On Jan. 14, Enck and a panel of leading EPA scientists addressed a standing-room-only crowd at Hoosick Falls' high school auditorium. The same day, New York officials asked the EPA to add the Saint-Gobain plant and other possible sources of contamination in Hoosick Falls to the Superfund priorities list. The state health department also recently announced plans to study cancer rates in the village and vicinity.

"We are giving this contamination problem a high priority," Enck said. "A very detailed study of groundwater is needed in Hoosick Falls to know what we are dealing with and how to best address it."

Engel said that the village's plan to install filters at the water plant is a good first step, but that the long-term solution should be to establish new wells to replace the contaminated ones.

Kevin Allard, 58, who worked at the plastics plant in the 1980s, said his mother died of pancreatic cancer at 54 and his father died of thyroid cancer at 81. In 2006, a 25-year-old friend of Allard's son died of pancreatic cancer. Now, he worries about the health of his children, in their early 30s.

"They grew up on that water," he said. "That's what concerns me."

In this Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016 photo, the Hoosic River runs through the village of Hoosick Falls, N.Y. (AP Photo/Mike Groll)

In this Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016 photo, Zander Spurr, a fifth grader at St. Mary's Academy, drinks water from a water bottle that has been set up in the school in Hoosick Falls, N.Y. Federal regulators have warned residents of the upstate New York factory village near the Vermont border not to drink water from municipal wells, and a plastics plant has agreed to supply bottled water and pay for a new filtration system. Mike Groll - AP Photo

In this Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016 photo, bottles of drinking water are seen in a hallway at St. Mary's Academy in Hoosick Falls, N.Y. Federal regulators have warned residents of the upstate New York factory village near the Vermont border not to drink water from municipal wells, and a plastics plant has agreed to supply bottled water and pay for a new filtration system. Mike Groll AP Photo

In this Thursday, Jan. 21, 2016 photo, Michael Hickey poses near Hoosick Falls municipal well 7 between two baseball fields in Hoosick Falls, N.Y. Federal regulators have warned residents of an upstate New York factory village near the Vermont border not to drink water from municipal wells, and a plastics plant has agreed to supply bottled water and pay for a new filtration system. The action this month resulted from a quest by Hickey to find out why so many people in Hoosick Falls had cancer. Mike Groll AP Photo

WATCH: Do not drink the water

Innovation Trail.org

By Jenna Flanagan

Jenna Flanagan is a reporter and host with New York NOW, WMHT, and MetroFocus, WNET/Thirteen. She also reports for Innovation Trail.

Jan. 26, 2016

The water in the Rensselaer County village of Hoosick Falls water has been deemed too contaminated to consume.

Credit WMHT

It's something most of us take for granted. You turn on the tap, fill a glass of water and have a nice refreshing drink.

But what if that water has been deemed too contaminated to consume? That's something residents of the Rensselaer County village of Hoosick Falls are confronted with as they try to determine how to move forward and make their water drinkable again.

"We've always seemed to have a higher incident of cancer here than other places."

Dr. Marcus Martinez has been practicing medicine in the village of roughly 5,000 since 2002, taking over his father's 30-year practice.

"We've always had higher incidence of prostate cancer, thyroid cancer, kidney cancer, we've just always seemed to have a lot more than what is the national average."

He wasn't the only one to notice.

Michael Hickey, a lifelong resident of Hoosick Falls, lost his father to kidney cancer in 2013 – a disease which his family has no history of and his father's lifestyle didn't seem to trigger. Once a beloved family friend and local teacher also passed away from a form of cancer that seemed equally mysterious, Hickey says he started looking around.

"It was really a random Google search. I looked at Saint-Gobain that my father worked at, and they had PTFE Teflon in the C8 panel and the first one that pops up on the list is kidney cancer and that's what my dad had passed away from. At that point that's what my dad had and he didn't really have a great death, pretty awful, so at that point, there really wasn't a whole lot of reasons for him to have kidney cancer."

But what is PFOA? A brief chemistry lesson:

PFOA stands for Perfluorooctanoic Acid, also known as C8.

What isn't known is how long residents have been ingesting the chemical, so Hickey reached out to , Judith Enck, EPA Region 2 district administrator.

"Once they got involved, it was in October, she kind of stepped in and expedited the process and got us to where we are today."

After confirming Hickey's findings, the EPA sent a letter to the mayor last November saying residents should not be using public drinking water. Two weeks later, in December, the village told residents not to drink the water, a subject that was cause for concern at a recent Village Board meeting.

One resident asked: "Our aquifer is poisoned. Is there a period of time known when that will clean itself up or is that permanent?"

A frustrated Mayor David Borge responded: "We don't have all the answers at this point, no

one is pretending that we do. But we want to try and put in place something that we're very confident will in fact work."

Other residents accused the mayor of trying to hide something.

"This is not a conspiracy. We are trying to

[Cross talk] "I'm just trying to ask a simple question."

"Yes you are. And I'm telling you that I do not recall that."

In the interim, Hoosick Falls residents have all been allotted 5 free gallons of bottled water per day to be picked up at the local Tops grocery store.

Who's footing the bill?

Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics. The plant is just a few yards away from Hoosick Falls' water treatment facility. Both Saint-Gobain and the plant's prior owners used the PFOA to manufacture heat-resistant wiring for decades, although the company says they stopped using it years ago.

Enck points out the official cause of the contamination has yet to be officially determined.

"We want to find the source of the pollution, we want it cleaned up, we want public health protected, and we are in a position to use either federal Superfund or the safe drinking water act or other federal laws that allow us to take action to protect communities like Hoosick Falls."

To ease some of the public concerns and get everyone up to speed on the situation, Healthy Hoosick Water, a grass-roots organization, held a public meeting with the EPA where Enck laid out some guidelines for dealing with the water issues.

"Do not cook with the water from the Hoosick Falls public water supply. Do not use water from the Hoosick Falls public water supply for humidifiers, use the bottled water."

However, Enck says the situation is not irredeemable.

"The good news here, if there is any, is that there are treatment technologies in the short term that can deal with existing drinking water plants, so people don't have to schlep 5 gallons of water every day to their homes."

The technology that Hoosick Falls' Village Board approved to address the contaminated water is a granulated activated carbon, or GAC, filtration system, manufactured by Calgon Carbon. Like the bottled water, Saint-Gobain has agreed to foot the installation fee.

Hoosick Falls Mayor David Borge explains the system.

"We know that the GAC filters are effective, extremely effective in stopping the PFOA and anything that size when you're talking one parts per trillion; that is so small, but these filters can stop that."

Still, Healthy Hoosick Water accuses Saint-Gobain setting the PFOA removal level at 20-parts-per-trillion while the group says GAC treatment systems in other communities have lowered PFOA levels to 1 or 2 parts-per-trillion. And they want that level.

In the meantime, Hoosick Falls residents will continue to pick up their bottled water as they wait to find out how well the GAC systems work.

Michael Hickey, whose initial inquiry led to the contamination findings, says he doesn't see himself as the local hero many herald him as.

"I don't really feel that way. Really it was kind of for my dad and doing the right thing for the community as a whole."

In a statement, Saint-Gobain says, 'Since we were first made aware of this situation more than a year ago, our focus has been working with the village of Hoosick Falls and the appropriate state and federal government agencies to find solutions. Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics is committed to helping the village of Hoosick Falls with this situation. Our employees live and work here and our top priority is doing the right thing for Hoosick Falls.'

Meanwhile, a class-action lawsuit on the part of Hoosick Falls residents is being considered.

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